guarded. But there is a row of shuttered windows above the blank walls that rise from the beach. Could I hold those shutters, too?

"IT was one afternoon when I was returning from my monthly tour in the bush," Wilton went on, as if speaking from some dream into which he had fallen. "I was very much the official that afternoon, and everything seemed to conspire to fasten it on me. The bobbing deference of the village chiefs; the shouts of the runners clearing my way; the straining chocolate-colored backs of the hammock-men, their white-and-crimson government loin-cloths—all reminded me that I was the Commissioner.

"All day I had been oppressed with a sense of what an invisible thing government is. There I was, being carried along in that primeval jungle, just the same for a thousand miles each way—just mud, trees, and sky. For all one could see, it might have been the first dawn of creation itself. Yet it was all soaked through and through with that unseen white man's law of which I was the representative.

"My personality was gone, for the moment; I was a mere instrument—an official instead of a man. As we swung round the corner of the House of the Old Mensah, I leaned out from under the hammock-top and looked up—it was the first time I had done so—frowning officially as I saw how badly those shutters needed painting. Then—a pair of them swung slowly open, and I saw her—saw the woman whom for three years I had held a prisoner in that house.

"Oh—" Wilton's voice rose almost to a cry that the surrounding darkness beat back, as walls beat back an echo. "It was the suddenness of it, I argued to myself as I paced the ramparts here that night. It was the effect of that caressing light of the late afternoon. It was those soft, revealing swathings of white. It was the contrast between that white-gold skin, that scarlet mouth, and those grinning black apes to whom I was accustomed. It was the green gleam of that band of uncut emeralds about the straight forehead—it was anything, I told myself—anything rather than the woman herself.

"It would pass in another moment, I promised myself, pacing to and fro here in my quarters like a caged beast. That was what I was—a human beast in an official cage. There were bars all about me: bars of duty, bars of race, bars of position. It was the sight of a caged woman that had made me realize the bars of my own cage.

"What could I hope for if I broke through them? What could I hope for her? We should both of us simply be swept off the board by those who play world-chess, with people for pawns.

"You know who she was, that woman at the window. It was Quamina herself. 'The Lady Quamina of Doonqwow'—I have written, and you have read, that name a score of times in my official reports.

"Over and over, to prove to myself the uselessness of it all, I told myself all that I knew about her. Quamina, daughter of old King Yirrah, that fierce, wily old Arab; Quamina of Doonqwow, that bloody city that even Africa could hardly tolerate, where the fires of Islam, pushed south into the watery smother of the bush, burned with such black smoke and strange stenches; Doonqwow, that perpetual cooking-pot of trouble, the city of reputed magic and proved secret poisoners. I remembered, deliberately, all the things I had heard from the men who went on the expedition that finally wiped Doonqwow off the map.

"I knew why Quamina, the last surviving member of her family, had been sent here, a thousand miles away, to Grand Jack. Too dangerous to be freed, by reason of her blood alliance with that secret masonic empire of the Fullahs; a woman, therefore, not to be slain—she had to be kept a prisoner. Two years before I had seen her curtained hammock, and train of women slaves, turn in at the doors of the House of the Old Mensah, which it was my duty to see that she never again left."

"Ah—yes—the doors," murmured the Governor. "We have the shutters open now; and—the doors?"

"Stayed closed," Wilton returned hastily. "Closed more tightly than before, if that were possible. Don't imagine that I gave in easily. Every day the struggle was fought over again. But I had seen her, and her face was burned on the back of my brain, and each afternoon found me again beneath that line of shuttered windows. That was all that I could do for her, don't you see? Just to let her see me, like that, under her windows—to let all the beach see me, if they wished. She understood; it was a triumph for her—the Commissioner under her windows. And sometimes the shutters opened. Not as a reward—understand that: as a torment, rather. That silent, gorgeous woman, searing me with all her unuttered hatred for her jailer.

"SIX months of that—then Mrs. Hugo." Wilton laughed harshly. "She suspected something that first evening, when I failed to respond to her fascinations. I did my best, but she knew; and there came a barb in her smile as she probed, and probed, until she found the wound that barb would enter.

"'Your fair prisoner,' she called Quamina, in that husky drawl of hers. A nigger woman, wasn't she? Oh—an Arab; and was there much difference? I can see the flash from under her lowered lids as she stuck the knife in and turned it in my flesh. She was bored with Africa, and I promised some amusement.

"I had told her that entrance to that house was forbidden; but the words slipped past her ears as if she were too uninterested in the whole affair to hear them. She stayed on and on, for days; mainly, I believe, because for the first time since coming to the Coast she had found something closed to her. I think she had some idea of finding a picturesque cause to take home with her; something about which she could perhaps get questions asked in Parliament—and her own name mentioned in connection with it.

"She stayed; and each day the rumors spread on the beach, and the old house opened its ears; nor did I dare appear beneath its windows, with that watching woman on the ramparts here. I stayed close to the castle and to Mrs. Hugo's side. As an assiduous host, I never allowed her to pass the gate without my escort; and I found places of interest for her to see, all carefully in the other direction from the House of the Old Mensah.

"Then, the fourth day of her visit, came a message from the chief at Bootri that drunken strangers were rioting in his village. I had to go, though it meant at least four hours away, and I could not take Mrs. Hugo on such an errand. But when I reached the village, and found a gang of Mrs. Hugo's own Kru-boys, all gloriously drunk on trade-gin, I realized what she had done. I drove the hammock-men mercilessly on the way back; but, even so, it was dark when I returned. What I had feared I hardly know; but I gasped with relief when I saw her, already dressed for dinner, standing in the lamplight.

"She was in a gracious mood—an insolent grace with a secret triumph in it. I mustn't bother to dress, she said; she knew I was tired; just come to dinner as I was. Her words came rapidly, and her eyes were dark and dilated. I wondered if she ever used drugs; so many of her type do—orchid creatures, without roots, they have to feed their nerves on strange foods. There was a string of something in her hand, and she held it out to me, extending her bare arm into the light, with a request that I would clasp it on for her. I took it. It was a string of uncut emeralds, long enough to go twice about her wrist.

"OVER the dinner, that we neither of us touched, she told me about it, in a jerky, glittering sort of way. She had thought it was only right to 'call.' I sat there, with a sinking heart, marveling at the ignorance that I had thought was bravado. A 'call' at that house—the last refuge of all the black arts of Doonqwow. 'Some sort of a princess,' she said. 'Mere politeness to show the poor thing some attention.'

"From what I saw afterward, I can picture that call, from the moment she passed the grinning Haussa sentry, babblingly eager to please this mysterious white woman from the castle. A squeak of the hinges, then the sun-steeped silence of the courtyard. The amazed eyes of the women; their aimless, frightened rushes, like coveys of quail; their whispers and twitterings. The great hall, hung with remnants of Arab magnificence. Then the silence that overspread the place again—that silence I knew so well.

"Then, at last, Quamina came. Why, heaven knows; yet why not? Who can tell the reasons, or the impulses, that made her gratify the curiosity of this woman of whom she had heard such rumors? Perhaps she had some curiosity of her own to gratify.

"But even I can hardly picture that interview. Quamina on her divan, in barbaric white and gold, as still, and as full of concealed fire, as those dull green gems about her head. And Mrs. Hugo, in full afternoon regalia, playing restlessly with her parasol, a faint, sarcastic smile on her lips. Between them a slave woman who translated back and forth.

"Quamina had asked frank questions; she had actually thought that Mrs. Hugo must be my wife. That was very amusing to Mrs. Hugo; there was contempt in her laughter as she told me of it.

"And then—she leaned forward, and began brushing at the table-cloth. 'Where do all these little white spiders come from?' she asked casually.

"Before I had time to answer—to do more than stare—she laughed and went on with her story.

"'I let Quamina know just exactly who I am,' she told me. 'She was quite polite after that—she understands position.'

"It was after that, it seemed, that Quamina had given her the emeralds.

"'A sort of tribute,' Mrs. Hugo called them. It was very well done, she said. She had admired the gems, and Quamina, detaching them from her veil, had handed them to one of the women, who brought them and dropped them on the floor before Mrs. Hugo. 'Quite picturesque—laid them at my feet and all that,' she rattled on. 'Of course, I understood it all. She realized my position at home, and made a bid for my influence. I'll do something for the poor thing when I get back—send her some of my old ball gowns, or something.'

"I GROANED inwardly; how could I make her understand the significance, to that scornful Arab woman, of her having actually stooped to pick up from the floor a bauble flung there by a slave woman?

"Just after that, I think, the censers were brought in and placed, one on each side of this supposedly honored guest of the Lady Quamina."

"Censers?" asked the Governor, breaking sharply in on the flood of quick, dry speech; and Wilton nodded somberly.

"Yes—censers. Mrs. Hugo wished she knew what it was they burned in them. Wonderful stuff, she said—so soothing. She felt like an idol, sitting there with those thin spires of smoke curling up about her. There was music from squatting women who played on marimbas, and a girl who danced. Then more music—'Quite good,' she said. 'Like a Bakst ballet setting put to melody.' She wished she could get it for Covent Garden.

"As she spoke she suddenly began brushing again at the table-cloth. She did not see the look that must have come into my face at that; my dawning horror and comprehension.

"Quamina did some magic after that, smiling a great deal as she performed some tricks with a golden bowl, and one of those nest-webs full of blind white baby spiders. She played with it, smiling, and never taking her eyes off the woman who sat there—'like an idol'—with those spirals of scented, soothing smoke coiling about her. The web seemed to grow—large as an egg—as an orange—as a cannon-ball; a throbbing mass of feeble life, seen through the opal meshes of the web. Then it burst, and there were spiders everywhere—nasty, eyeless things that crawled and crawled. It was at that point in her narrative that Mrs. Hugo sprang up from the dinner-table, upsetting her wine-glass in a red streak across the cloth, and screamed.

"It was anger, that first scream. Her face was flushed, and her eyes all black dilated pupils. What did I mean, asking her to sit at such a table—all swarming with those horrible, crawling things? Then she screamed again, this time in terror, tearing at her arms and neck as she fled out on to the ramparts."

As Wilton stopped, the thick silence closed in on them again, and to both that darkness seemed tenanted by the shape his words had evoked: a writhing, frantic woman, with white, convulsive shoulders, beating herself against the stones in an attempt to escape that which existed solely in her own imagination.

"It was ghastly," resumed Wilton hoarsely. "I tried everything, but it was no good. There were moments when I almost thought I saw the things myself, in their blind, feeble insensateness, that knew nothing except to crawl upward. There were hours of it, her nigger women holding her down, lest she throw herself from the ramparts, while I tried remedy after remedy. Then, at last, along toward midnight, I saw that I must go—down across the beach—to Quamina."

WILTON paused again. Now, if ever, he must make the other understand; yet now there was so much that he could never tell. And there was so little to tell, in a way. He found himself divided against himself, half of him eager to speak, the other half on guard over his tongue.

"I was there before I realized it," he said—"there before the doors, with the surprised eyes of the sentry flashing at me from out of the shadows. I was expected, I saw, for one half of the doors stood ajar, and the squeal of its hinges, as I pushed it open, was proof of how well I had kept watch—even against myself. I groped my way in, and the stale, damp reek of the courtyard rose about me.

"I knew where to go, from Mrs. Hugo's description. She was there, waiting for me, in that hall full of soft light from tiny wicks floating in jars of palm-oil. It seemed almost as if she had not moved since that other woman had left, she was so still, crouching alone on her divan. So deadly still—so vital—so beautiful.

"She spoke first, for I saw that I must make her do that. I just stood there, waiting, and—at last—she spoke. 'Why do you come here, Wilton Arfi?' she asked. And at the sound of that crisp, clean Arabic I knew why she was here in Grand Jack. That woman, free and off to some Fullah stronghold beyond the Tchad, would set the whole desert in a blaze.

"I have the right to come," I answered; and at that she smiled."

Pressing his hands to his eyes, Wilton strove to shut out the vision that tormented them: the shifting shadows of that dim hall; the gold-white woman with the smile on her lips that told him how he would have to pay, to the last bitter drop she chose to exact. But that vision was for himself alone.

"'And the woman?' she asked me. 'Has she also the right to come to Quamina?'

"'She is a great lady,' I told her. 'One to whom all doors are open.'

"'Is she, then, of the women of your king?' she asked.

"'She is the wife of a great emir,' I replied.

"She laughed at that, and as I heard it I understood something of that interview of the afternoon.

"'Then what does the wife of an emir in the house of another man?' she asked.

"It was hopeless to make her understand—all the more so because she understood some of it too well! Mrs. Hugo and Quamina, worlds apart, yet each with a bitter half-understanding of the other underlying their misconceptions. And it was that half-understanding that was the real trouble. And there was I, between